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BUILDING ON SELF STRENGTH
(The BOSS Approach to Leader Development)

An Individual Study Project
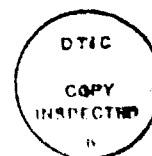Intended for Publication

June 20, 1990

by

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    The wisdom of the handicapped (who focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot) is the foundation for a management philosophy called Building on Self Strength (BOSS). It contends that while the Army must do all things exceptionally well, its individual members do not. Instead, BOSS suggests that there is a greater payoff, because of intrinsic motivation, if we build on self strengths. The corollary, manage individual weaknesses, is best accomplished by finding ways to make weaknesses irrelevant. BOSS proposes that we stop encouraging individuals to be a jack of all trades, because we

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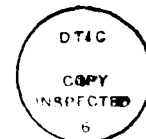An Individual Study Project
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INTRODUCTION

> On the threshold of a new century, the United States is
> confronted by a world in the throes of fundamental and
> unprecedented change.[1]

This opening sentence of the Army's recent white paper, "A Strategic
Force for the 1990s and Beyond," is an alert. It warns us against a "business
as usual" attitude. In a way, it hints that old paradigms may be in danger
and invites a search for new ideas.

To guide the Army through these "throes of fundamental and unprecedented
change," the white paper describes six imperatives. Three of these -- a
quality force, meaningful and fulfilling training, and leader development --
relate directly to people. This emphasis on people echoes the wisdom of an
earlier Army leader, General Creighton Abrams, who pointed out: "People
aren't in the Army; people are the Army."

The purpose here is to propose a management philosophy that supports
this focus on people. The approach is called "Building On Self Strength" and
has the convenient acronym "BOSS." As a fundamental philosophy of management,
BOSS has broad implications for both personnel and training policies. However-
er, this paper concentrates primarily on leader development.

The paper has four parts. Part I, BUILDING ON SELF STRENGTH, explains
the BOSS philosophy of leader development. Part II, IDENTIFYING LEADER COMPE-
TENCIES, summarizes the Army's efforts to identify the competencies needed by
leaders, as they develop. Part III, ASSESSMENT TOOLS, describes some tools
now available to help assess individual leadership competencies. Finally,
Part IV, APPLYING THE BOSS PHILOSOPHY, suggests ways to implement the BOSS
management philosophy, aided by leadership competency assessment tools.

Part I -- BUILDING ON SELF STRENGTH (BOSS)

Origin of the Philosophy. When we are willing to abandon established paradigms and search for new approaches, the results can be surprising. Such is the case with the BOSS management philosophy. Its inspiration comes from an unlikely source -- the successes of physically handicapped people in the working world.

One of the most admirable traits of such handicapped people is their outlook on life. They focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot. That approach is both practical and uplifting. The fact that the Army is composed of strong, able-bodied men and women does not negate the wisdom of that approach nor make it irrelevant. Indeed, this paper contends, if we are to attract and maintain a quality, well-led Army in the future, we need to adopt a similar approach. We need to build on self strength and manage individual weakness.

Definitions. To understand the BOSS philosophy, we need to define two terms: self strength and weakness. In this context, self strengths are innate talents. They are natural endowments which reflect a special aptitude. They embody a capacity or potential for exceptional performance. In short, self strengths are those things a person does (or could do) best.

Examples of talents in this sense include the ability to: relate to others; anticipate change and reorganize complex organizations to adapt appropriately; grasp and retain details; see the forest as well as the trees; make sound decisions with limited or conflicting input; understand complex mathematical relations; take prudent risks; inspire others to surpass their best previous performance; operate independently; operate interdependently; etc.

On the other hand, a weakness is a non-talent, an inability to do something well. We all have weaknesses. In fact, we all have more individual

2

weaknesses than strengths. The distinguishing aspect of BOSS is how we deal with individual weaknesses.

Basic Concepts. Simply stated, the BOSS philosophy is that we should build on self strengths (innate talents) and manage individual weaknesses (non-talents). We implement the philosophy by arranging things so that people do as much as possible of what they do best. We let them develop their talents to the fullest extent. The KEY element of the BOSS philosophy is that *the best management of an individual weakness is to make it irrelevant*. We do this largely through technology (letting some device do those things someone does not do well) or by reassigning those things to others (whose talents are complementary).

Under the BOSS philosophy, the worst way to manage an individual weakness is to insist that someone continually do something for which they have little or no talent. The next worst approach is to spend resources training someone to do something for which they have little or no talent. Such practices can be expensive, frustrating, demotivating and often counterproductive. Yet, instead of being a last resort, these practices are typically the first things some managers do when they identify an individual's weakness.

Those who practice the BOSS philosophy strive to make a subordinate's weaknesses unimportant. They do that by using technology or the talents of other teammates. They do not ignore the weaknesses, but instead focus on developing a team with complementary skills. The goal is to make the non-talents of unit members unneeded in the accomplishment of the unit mission.

This means that we should not waste time trying to develop non-talents beyond the minimum essential skill level. Once acceptable competency is achieved in a critical (but non-talent) area, we should do only enough to

maintain proficiency. We should not dwell on weaknesses. There are bigger payoffs in exploiting strengths.

Admittedly, developing weaknesses makes management easier. Trying to enhance an individual's weaknesses to raise them to the same level as their strengths is to strive to make all their skills equal. People become like interchangeable parts. It doesn't matter which job we put them in, they'll be able to do all things equally well (or equally average). The problem is that although developing weaknesses may make management easier, it does not produce top quality teams.

The relationship between versatility ("well-roundedness") and quality is pivotal. In fact, the Army's white paper makes a key point in describing its first imperative -- quality. "The experiences of recent years have reaffirmed that **quality** **produces** the **versatility** needed to respond rapidly to unforeseen situations."[2] [Emphasis added.] The reverse is NOT true; versatility does not necessarily produce quality. For the most part, the direct pursuit of versatility produces mediocrity. Usually, in striving to do all (or even most) things well, we wind up unable to do anything exceptionally well.

Applying **the** **Principles** **of** **War**. For military thinkers, there is a useful way to view the BOSS concept. That is to consider it as the application of two of the Principles of War. "Building on Self Strength" is akin to the principle of Mass. (Concentrate combat power at the decisive place and time.)[3] "Managing a weakness" is like the complementary principle of Economy of Force. (Allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts.)[4]

The Principles of Mass and Economy of Force are complementary in that they deal with the allocation of resources. Combined, they imply that if the minimum essential resources have been allocated to secondary efforts (Economy of Force), the best application of uncommitted resources is to enhance the primary effort (Mass).

This is the essence of the BOSS concept. We are likely to achieve greater individual growth (and win more campaigns and battles) if we concentrate on exploiting our strengths. This can best be accomplished by making our weaknesses as irrelevant and inconsequential as possible. To these secondary efforts, we should allocate only the minimum essential resources.

As FM 100-5 (Operations) notes, these Principles have "stood the tests of analysis, experimentation, and practice."[5] However, their application should not be limited to operations alone. These time tested Principles have merit in training and personnel policies, as well as operations.

Intrinsic Motivation -- The Biggest Advantage. Perhaps the most attractive feature of building on self strength is that it takes advantage of intrinsic motivation. People like doing what they do well. It motivates them. They strive to beat their own personal bests. You need only talk to well conditioned runners after a race or successful shooters after a pistol or rifle match to know the truth of this. Nothing motivates like success. People set new goals, new personal bests, then try to surpass those. People like to do what they do well. More important, their success motivates them to do even better.

From the Army's standpoint, that is a big plus, for several reasons. First, nothing helps retention like good training. People stay with an organization that-lets them spend time pursuing what interests them.

Second, intrinsic motivation enhances training effectiveness, which is another advantage of the BOSS approach. Traditionally, people have developed ingenious ways to avoid things they don't like. With the BOSS approach, instead of seeking ways to get out of doing something (practicing a non-talent), they will find ways to do more of what they like doing (training and developing further in their talented areas). It is also reasonable to expect that they will get more out of that training.

Finally, "Building on Self Strength" improves individual morale. That impact spreads. It improves unit morale. The resulting combination is highly motivated people, who like what they're doing, who know how to do it exceptionally well, and who want to stay in the Army to continue doing it! Those are the results of intrinsic motivation.

Summary. In Part I, I presented the Build on Self Strength philosophy for leader development. BOSS proposes that we focus on what we do best. That approach suggests the corollary: we must manage our weaknesses. The key to that is *how we manage our weaknesses*, which I contend should be to make them irrelevant. We do this largely through technology or by reassigning those things to others. We must avoid striving to be a jack of all trades because we cannot afford to be a master of none.

But what strengths does the Army need?

Part II -- IDENTIFYING LEADER COMPETENCIES

For the BOSS philosophy of leader development to have any value for the Army, it is important to know the strengths or competencies that the Army needs in its leaders, particularly its senior leaders (and aspiring senior leaders). The Army has devoted considerable effort to identifying those competencies: DA Pamphlet 600-80 (Executive Leadership) is a product of that effort.

It describes three broad areas of competencies. The first is conceptual and decision skills. These are cognitive skills that involve systems understanding, envisioning/anticipating, proactive thinking, scanning, problem formulation, reflective thought and critical self evaluation. The second broad area is technical competencies, which include system and subsystem development, interdependencies and technological understanding. The third

area involves interpersonal skills which include organizational representation, understanding people, subordinate development, communications and personal stamina. The 58-page DA Pam on Executive Leadership explains these competencies in detail.[6]

Of special interest is the chapter on leader development. It describes the stages of development and the levels of capability needed in each stage. DA Pam 600-80 notes:

> Passage from one level of capability to the next is a complex and long-term process. Some will not make the passage from the direct level of leadership. Others may make the transition to organizational leadership, but no higher. Individual capability to acquire the frames of reference required at each level of leadership can be considered as an interaction of three factors:
>
> 1. cognitive ability
>
> 2. individual values and temperament
>
> 3. knowledge and skills that have been developed through training and experience.
>
> Assuming that the cognitive ability and the temperament required of a leader are sufficiently present, leadership development then becomes a function of the opportunity to develop the appropriate knowledge and skills.[7] [Their emphasis.]

This last sentence underscores an important point that relates directly to the BOSS philosophy. The key to developing leaders is the opportunities we provide them to develop. Under the BOSS approach, we encourage them to build on self strength. We arrange things to give them the opportunity to grow in their areas of talent. Once minimum essential skill levels have been met, we advise our aspiring leaders to manage their weaknesses by making them irrelevant and instead build on self strength.

But how do we know what those self strengths are?

Part III -- ASSESSMENT TOOLS

To build on strengths, we have to be able to identify them. As we mature, we accumulate clues about our areas of talent and non-talent. Input from parents and friends, appraisals from teachers and bosses, and our personal sense of satisfaction when we succeed (or fail), all combine to indicate self strengths and weaknesses.

However, such feedback may give us an incomplete, biased or misleading picture. Necessarily, this input is based on opportunities we have had to demonstrate our competencies (or incompetencies) and the quality of the feedback we receive. However, a person may excel at things they have never tried or had properly evaluated. Therefore, a more comprehensive and objective means is needed to assess a person's total potential in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

Fortunately, significant progress has been made in the last two decades to develop ways of assessing individual competencies. Assessment tools now exist that are more sophisticated than mere fill-in-the-blank aptitude tests. There are scientifically researched and developed instruments that meet comprehensive standards of validity (measures what is intended to be measured), reliability (measures accurately over time) and legal fairness (free from racial, ethnic and sexual bias). As such, they deserve our attention.

Career Path Appreciation. The Army has been paying attention. In fact, the Army Research Institute (ARI) has examined for several years a method called Career Path Appreciation (CPA).[8] CPA is an interactive assessment administered by an experienced interviewer. Tasks are performed that require judgments to be made by the respondent. These judgments reveal characteristic patterns of decision making that are then discussed. The results of the CPA provide an indication of a person's level of capability. These levels of capability are similar to those described earlier in DA Pam 600-80.

ARI has tested the Career Path Appreciation extensively. Indeed, its testing history and results are impressive.

> CPA has been tested for 10 years in British industry, 5 years in the British Army, 3 years in the US Army, and 3 years under cross cultural conditions in South Africa, Namibia, and the Solomon Islands. Test samples include women and minority groups. The evidence is strongly accumulating that the **CPA** **gives** an accurate assessment **both** of an individual's **current** **level** **of** **potential**, regardless of previous education, opportunity and experience, or minority group background; **and** of that person's **future** **potential**. [Emphasis added.] ... Test use of the Career Path Appreciation in the Army so far has shown consistently that the experience has led to very practical discussion of career development plans and thus that it might be a useful tool for aiding professional development.[9]

Corps' LEAD Team Efforts. ARI is not the only Army element working with assessment instruments. One of the Army's major commands, the Corps of Engineers, recently used a leadership competency assessment tool developed by Selection Research, Inc. (SRI), the parent company of the Gallup Poll people. As an outgrowth of their Leadership Enhancement and Development (LEAD) initiative, the Corps commissioned a detailed study of their senior leadership. This assessment was conducted in late 1988 "to establish a base line profile of what Corps leadership looks like in terms of usable definitions of critical competencies."[10] The study of 187 executive leaders included not only the senior military (General Officers and senior Colonels) and civilian (SESs and senior GM/GS grades) leadership of the Corps, but also executives from more than a dozen of the major engineering corporations across the nation.

The SRI assessment tool is based on a structured telephone interview, which contains more than 300 open-ended questions. (Research done by SRI, which has conducted more than 175,000 interviews during the last 20 years, reveals no statistically significant difference between the results of a telephone interview and an in-person interview.[11]) SRI worked closely with

9

the Corps' LEAD Team in developing and testing the leadership assessment instrument to enhance its construct, content and criterion validity.[12] (These characteristics are essential today if use of the instrument is to stand up in court.) With the participant's permission, each interview was taped, transcribed and analyzed.

The results of this effort produced an assessment tool that confirmed 19 leadership competencies for the Corps of Engineers. They include the following:

+ VISION, the capacity to create and project beneficial images that can inspire dedication.

+ FOCUS, the ability to set a direction, maintain that direction and make corrections when necessary.

+ COURAGE, the capacity to increase one's determination in the face of resistance, to relish challenges in one's work.

+ COMPETITION, the desire to win.

+ ARRANGER, the ability to coordinate people and their activities so that work gets done efficiently.

+ TEAM, the capacity to get people to help each other use their strengths to achieve their goals.

Those interviewed received a confidential assessment of each of their leadership competencies. The Corps' leaders received the aggregated results. This summary provides a profile of current leadership, an indication of the pool of leadership talent available to meet future needs, and a baseline to measure the effectiveness of Corps' leader development programs.

Assessment Centers. Another popular assessment tool is the assessment center. Despite its misleading name, the term refers not to a place, but rather a process. It involves multiple evaluation techniques which simulate work situations. These include in-basket exercises, written communication

exercises, oral presentations, group discussions, and simulated counseling interviews with subordinates. These exercises frequently last several days. Performance is usually evaluated by senior members of the organization who observe, confer and report their findings about each candidate. "While the assessment center methodologies are still so new as to be aptly termed experimental, they have proven to be substantially more reliable predictors of future performance than traditional written examinations or panel interviews."[13]

The popularity of assessment centers is spreading. They have been used by private industry (AT&T), and in government at the federal (IRS), state (Illinois), and local (City of Philadelphia) levels.[14] They have also been used to some extent by the Army ROTC program as a tool for evaluating leadership potential. Despite its advantages, assessment center use is tempered by the fact that it tends to be time consuming and resource intensive.

Other Assessment Efforts. In addition to these efforts, there are other examples of competency assessments being used in development programs. The U.S. Air Force has recently launched a study to enhance their Executive Development System. They are anticipating high retirement rates from their SES members during the next few years. Consequently, the Air Force is seeking to build the best possible executive development program.

Hay Systems, Inc. is undertaking that effort. In its preliminary research, Hay found that the private sector (IBM, GE, American Airlines, and Martin Marietta) has made extensive use of competency assessments. For years now, these large firms have developed profiles of desired competencies and used them for identifying, managing, selecting and developing their senior corporate leadership. Persuaded by this information and other input, the Air Force approved the Hay recommendations to conduct Behavioral Event Interviews

and develop competency models for target jobs. The SES Study Design and Final Report are scheduled to be presented to senior Air Force officials this summer.[15]

Summary. Like others, the Army has recognized the importance of leader development. We have tried hard to identify the competencies needed by leaders, particularly senior leaders. Likewise, we have devoted considerable research to develop ways to assess leadership competencies. These efforts have produced some impressive results. Tools now exist with the validity and reliability to support the Army imperative of leader development and meet all legal standards of racial, ethnic and sexual fairness.

But how do we use these tools to build on self strength?

Part IV -- APPLYING THE BOSS PHILOSOPHY

General. In its broadest sense, the BOSS concept represents a philosophical approach to the management of people. It rests on the belief that while the Army must be able to do all things exceptionally well, its individual members do not. Indeed, the basic premise of BOSS is that there is no one (at least in the last 2,000 years) who is capable of doing all things exceptionally well. Therefore, we should manage people based on their current and most "developable" strengths.

Such an approach has far-reaching implications for personnel management and training. BOSS makes personnel management more challenging, because personnel policies must consider the added dimension of matching complementary competencies. On the other hand, training is likely to become more effective because of the significant advantages of intrinsic motivation. Regardless, the impacts of applying the BOSS philosophy are broad.

12

Narrowing the Focus. While it is useful to contemplate the implications of widely adopting the BOSS concept, the scope of this paper is narrower. Here, the focus is on leader development. Having presented the framework (BOSS) and identified the Army's needs (DA Pam 600-80), we examined some of the tools (leadership competency assessments). Now, we will describe their use.

Life Cycle Application. Under the BOSS philosophy, assessment tools can be used throughout the life cycle of a leader's development. This includes accessions, basic branch selection, functional area designation, career planning, assignments, schooling, evaluation of training effectiveness, promotions, and retirement.

Two Perspectives. In each of these processes, there are always two perspectives, the individual's and the organization's. Leadership competency assessments have a role in each. The individual uses them to plan and measure personal development. The Army needs them to manage leader development and to ensure adequate resources exist to support the program.

Some knowledgeable experts contend that one instrument cannot serve both needs. They believe that an individual will respond or behave differently if the results of an assessment might be used by the Army to "manage" their assignments, schooling or promotions. These experts feel that individuals will tend to react in a way that matches what they believe the Army "wants or expects" as a reaction. Of course, you must assume that it's possible to (1) know the desired answer or reaction, and (2) be adept enough to produce it.

Quite frankly, such reasoning may have some merit as long as the Army focuses on "weakness" and uses it as a discriminator. However, under the BOSS philosophy, where personnel management decisions are oriented on strengths not weaknesses, there may be fewer attempts to guess the "right" response and a greater effort to provide the "accurate" one.

13

Word of Caution. At this point, a work of caution is in order: Leadership Competency Assessments should *never* be used as the *sole* tool in any decision. From the individual's perspective, the assessment should always be validated against personal experience. From the organization's perspective, the assessment should always be considered along with other evaluations of performance and potential contained in the record.

Apparent differences compel further scrutiny. The assessment may be invalid because it was given on an "off" day, or the evaluation may be misleading because the superior had limited time to observe or the individual had limited opportunity to demonstrate their prowess. The assessment tool should always be a *supplement to*, not a *substitute for*, other relevant data.

Conclusions. At the beginning, we noted that we are "confronted by a world in the throes of fundamental and unprecedented change." Clearly, we need a framework to look beyond the present. We cannot be satisfied with trying to *predict* the future, we must *shape* it. To do that, we should start with a philosophy towards people that takes advantage of their full potential. We must exploit the power of intrinsic motivation.

BOSS provides a framework of leader development for doing this. DA Pamphlet 600-80 and similar publications describe the leadership competency needs of the Army, and advances in the behavioral sciences provide us the tools (leadership competency assessments) to build on that framework. To implement the BOSS philosophy, there are several specific steps that can be taken:

(1) The Army should adopt a standard ACCESSIONS assessment tool to administer to commissioning program applicants. This would include applicants for OCS, ROTC, USMA and Direct Commission. The assessment could screen applicants to determine their suitability for the officer corps. This evaluation

14

could serve a purpose similar to the ASVAB which is administered to enlisted candidates.

By screening applicants based on leadership potential using a predictive assessment tool, we can benefit both the individual and the Army. The individual will get feedback about whether or not they are suited for military service, and if not, perhaps an indication of where their talents lie. At the same time, the Army will be able to identify a pool of candidates showing high potential as quality officers.

(2) **The Army should use the results of the ACCESSIONS assessment to assist in Basic Branch Selection and subsequent Functional Area Designation.** This information could materially assist the individual and the Army in matching the talents of its aspiring officers with the needs of the Army.

By providing feedback to the aspirants, they are able to make more informed decisions regarding their preferences for a given branch. This is particularly helpful in certain specialty branches where technical competencies may be essential. Later, this assessment information can offer additional insights to a young officer and his or her advisor at PERSCOM when it is time to make Functional Area Designations.

(3) **The Army should adopt a standard FIELD GRADE assessment tool to administer near the 10th year of service.** This could be done in conjunction with Command and Staff College level schooling, or at fixed point in terms of years of service.

This assessment could have multiple uses. It could serve the individual as a near mid-career tool for career planning. When compared with the ACCESSIONS results, it provides a reliable measure of progress in leader development and training effectiveness. This "mid-course evaluation" offers the individual a realistic assessment of Field Grade potential. It can serve as a guidepost for planning future assignments and schooling. For the Army, it

provides the personnel managers with the same kind of information to assist the individual in building on self strengths.

In the aggregate, it also provides the Army leadership with a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of its leader development program, a view of the pool of talent it has approaching the Field Grade ranks, and (if the Army chooses to use it as such) an aid in the selection process for promotion. This is particularly true for those whose "totally maxed out" files we evaluate for early promotion. Board members seeking a "positive" discriminator for BZ selections would probably be very grateful to have the insights of an instrument proven valid and reliable in predicting potential.

(4) **The Army should adopt a standard SENIOR OFFICER assessment tool to administer near the 20th year of service.** This could be done in conjunction with Senior Service College level schooling, or at a fixed point in terms of years of service.

This assessment could have multiple uses, all similar to the FIELD GRADE one, except at a higher level. In addition, such an assessment could benefit career planning for the post-retirement years.

Final Comments. These four conclusions represent a significant but narrow application of the BOSS philosophy. Properly used, the results of these assessments have the potential to enhance dramatically the quality of decisions made by individuals and the Army in leader development programs. Other applications exist, particularly in the training area, but are beyond the scope of this paper. The focus here has been on leader development, and the needs, tools and uses of those tools to achieve that development.

Changing events in the world demand competent leadership. Advances in the sophistication of the tools which assess these leadership competencies make them an idea whose time has come. To ignore these tools -- used by

others around the world; proven reliable over extended periods of time; tested rigorously in our Army; and, employed by multi-discipline corporations with multi-national interests -- is to deny ourselves our best chance to **shape** our future. The Army's white paper emphasizes this point when it concludes: "In the final analysis, the capabilities of the Army depend not only on the quality of our soldiers, but also on the **competence** of our leaders."[16]

Let's identify and promote those competencies in our Army and build on our self strengths.

ENDNOTES

(1) Carl E. Vuono, GEN, "A Strategic Force for the 1990s and Beyond," January 1990, cover letter.

(2) Vuono, p. 2.

(3) U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5, Operations, Washington, 5 May 1986, p.174 (hereafter referred to "FM 100-5").

(4) FM 100-5, p. 174.

(5) FM 100-5, p. 173.

(6) U.S. Department of the Army, Pamphlet 600-80, Executive Leadership, Washington, 19 June 1987, pp. 1-58.

(7) DA Pamphlet 600-80, p. 49.

(8) Gillian P. Stamp, "Longitudinal Research into Methods of Assessing Managerial Potential," Technical Report. 819, U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social sciences, October 1988, p. 11.

(9) Elliott Jaques, et al., "Senior Leadership Performance Requirements at the Executive Level," Research Report 1420, U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, January 1986, p. 41.

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(14) Ibid., p. 444.

(15) Interview with Dr. Joyce L. Shields, President, Hay Group, Hay Systems, Inc., Washington, DC, 21 December 1989.

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